

CHAPTER ONE

Shopping for Time

The bargain was simply too good to pass up. Never mind that she was in Florida visiting her mother and that her kitchen pantry was a thousand miles away in Maryland. Mom has never been easily deterred when she's convinced something will serve her family. It was 1979, and as a young homemaker on a meager budget, Starkist tuna fish at twenty-nine cents a can would help stretch her grocery money.

So she ran over to Publix supermarket and snatched up some sixty cans of the white chunk fish in water. (It was probably soon thereafter when grocery stores began imposing limits per offer.) Mentally preparing overstuffed tuna fish sandwiches with chopped pickle, and creamy tuna broccoli casserole, she giddily paid the cashier. Back at Grandma's house, Mom stuffed the precious discs in shoe-toes, between layers of clothing, and alongside her toiletries. Somehow she managed to cram all sixty cans into an already-full suitcase.

And yes, every last can made it safely back to our Aquarius Avenue duplex where we kids and Dad were served a variety of tuna dishes for weeks on end. This probably explains our strong aversion to tuna casserole that persists to this day.

You may chuckle at the idea of a suitcase full of tuna fish, but you won't laugh too loudly. That's because you've probably got your own tuna fish story. And what's more, you're proud of it. We women take our shopping seriously.

We scour the Sunday paper for coupons and sales. We haunt thrift stores. We track down bargains better than a hound dog on a scent. We stalk a falling price as closely as a Wall Street trader follows a promising stock. We've even been known to commit acts of insanity like camping out overnight just to be first in line for a half-price sale or advancing on the shopping mall the day after Thanksgiving.

We're experts in our trade. We know which time of year to shop for what items. We know which supermarket has the best produce and where to find the best deals online. We don't get taken in by anyone, and, like Mom, we never pass up a good deal.

The reality is, however, we don't often manage *the time* God has granted us on this earth with the same intentionality or skill that we bring to shopping. Think for a minute:

- Do you plan ahead to maximize your fruitfulness each day, or do you simply let life happen?
- Do you make choices based on Scripture or on what feels good at the moment?
- Do you strategize to use your talents to bless your family and church, or do you employ them primarily for your own personal fulfillment?
- Do you evaluate every opportunity in light of biblical priorities, or do you do whatever it takes to get ahead?

- Do you consider whom God would have you serve, or do you try to please everyone all the time?

While we constantly—almost unconsciously—plan, evaluate, strategize, and make wise choices when shopping, we often neglect to do so with the most important matters of our lives. We wouldn't dream of going to the grocery store without a shopping list, or buying a car without haggling over the sticker price, or purchasing new shoes without checking the price tag, but we throw away our time as if we had an endless supply.

As a result, we often miss out on the best deals life has to offer and end up paying big time in guilt, anxiety, and a lack of confidence that we're really doing the will of God. More often than not, we're overwhelmed by life's choices and demands. Perhaps most unfortunately, we lack fruitfulness in Christ's kingdom.

But it doesn't have to be like this. We can know—with absolute certainty—that we are doing all God wants us to do. Peace and joy and rest can be an everyday experience. We can live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called (Eph. 4:1). And we can anticipate that future day when we will hear those words—"Well done, good and faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:21).

How? *By becoming shoppers of time.* This isn't our bright idea. It comes straight from Scripture. Ephesians 5:15–16 tells us how to live like we shop: "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil."

Look Carefully

Check out the first part of this verse: "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise." It's a sobering com-

mand, is it not? It means that we are to walk with the utmost accuracy, with extreme care. The NKJV reads: “See then that you walk circumspectly.” To be circumspect means to look around with caution.

We are not to trudge blindly or routinely through our days. We shouldn’t just let life happen and try to deal with the results, be what they may. We should not allow one day to flow simply into the next, being concerned only with the present moment. No, we must look around. We must develop keen eyes. We must examine our lives. We must evaluate our present manner of living and consider how to prepare for the future. We must walk circumspectly through each and every day.

After all, we wouldn’t dream of sauntering through a clothing store with our eyes closed, picking up whatever we touch, placing it on the counter, and hoping it would turn into a wardrobe. No, we carefully walk through the store with our eyes wide open. We consider style. We study the price tag. We evaluate quality.

This verse in Ephesians tells us to live the way we shop—carefully. It means we look *backward* and ponder our life thus far so that we might avoid past errors and repeat former victories. It necessitates that we look *forward* and not embark upon a course (whether short or long) until we’ve considered where it will lead. It requires us to take an honest look *inside* and question our motives, our reasons for the choices that we make. It means we look *around* and take stock of our present fruitfulness. It entails looking *beside* us for critique, help, and wisdom from fellow believers. Most importantly, it means we look *up* and seek guidance from God’s Word. This is how to be intentional, purposeful, and, as this verse says, *wise* in the way we walk.

Oh, and did you notice that there are only two kinds of

women mentioned here—the wise and the unwise? With its usual bluntness, Scripture makes it clear that there is no third option. We are either wise or unwise. Smart or foolish. And of course, none of us wants to be a fool! Fortunately, the next part of this verse tells us how to avoid this fate: *by making the best use of the time.*

Making the Best Use of the Time

This phrase, “making the best,” means to “buy up, rescue from loss, or improve” the use of time. It is a metaphor taken from the merchants and traders of the ancient Near East, who aggressively pursued the best deals when they would buy, sell, or trade. (We told you this idea of “shopping for time” comes straight from Scripture!)

Actually, this brings to mind another of Mom’s shopping stories. As you know, the time right after Christmas is the peak of bargain-hunting season. The stores are plastered with large, inviting “Half-Price Sale!” and “75 Percent Off!” signs, and you rarely find something at full price. Well, one extra-busy winter Mom missed those all-important, after-Christmas sales. And when the following Christmas rolled around, she realized the serious consequences of not buying up when the buying was good.

Have you ever bought Christmas wrapping paper at the beginning of December? It costs something like ten dollars a yard, which is what Mom ended up spending. Some of her gifts weren’t worth the paper they were covered in! It was painful. So you know where she was the morning after Christmas that year. Yep, she was buying up all the half-price wrapping paper she could get her hands on. And some early Christmas gifts to boot!

That’s the idea of this verse in Ephesians. We’re to approach

life the same way we go after bargains. We need to discern the best opportunities life has to offer. Then we must seize these opportunities and make them our highest priorities. Every day presents us with countless options for how to spend our time. However, only some are truly great deals. Only a few things are really important.

Our job is to figure out what these prime deals are—these key opportunities—and devote all our time and energy to them. This means choosing *not* to do a thousand other things. It means saying no to a lot of enticing options. Here's where it gets tricky. Obviously, we don't want the "bad deals" to keep us from what is truly valuable. We don't want sinful pursuits to deter us from what is God glorifying. But, it's often the good things such as a ministry opportunity, a relational pursuit, a money-making venture, a leisure activity, or a hobby that hinder us from making the *best* choices. It's frequently these good things that distract us from the best things.

So how do we learn to spot the best deals and ignore the bad ones? What are the secrets to discovering life's most excellent bargains? In the following chapters, we will discuss how to become savvy shoppers of time. But first, there is one fundamental principle we must understand.

A Time for Every Season

Think back five years ago. Wasn't your life different from the way it is now? Maybe you weren't even a Christian at that time. Perhaps you have since gotten married or graduated or changed jobs or moved to a new place or had a baby (or two or more!). You may have experienced a life-altering tragedy or a surprising success.

Even if you don't feel as if your life is dramatically different, change has occurred, however imperceptibly. You've

probably walked through relational changes, experienced physical changes, learned new skills, or developed new interests. Most significantly, if you are a believer, Christ has been conforming you to his image. Undoubtedly your life is different from the way it was five years ago. And the same will be true five years from now. That's because *our lives are made up of changing seasons*.

It tells us so in Ecclesiastes: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven” (3:1). This biblical passage goes on to list fourteen couplets that cover the range of human activity. There is “a time to be born, and a time to die; . . . a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; . . . a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (3:2–7). For everything there is a season. For everything there is a time.

So it is with us as women. Our lives are never static or stationary. New seasons keep rolling in—each with its own unique joys and challenges. In fact, just about the time we adjust to our present season, it's time to make way for a new one!

A woman may pass through many seasons in her lifetime. Here are a few:

- Childhood
- Adolescence
- Singleness
- Marriage
- Childbearing
- Mothering preschool children
- Mothering school-aged children
- Mothering teenaged children
- Empty-nesting

- Menopause
- Caregiving to elderly parent(s)
- Grandmothering
- Widowhood

This is not an exhaustive list. There may be additional seasons you will experience and ones you will never pass through. For example, certain women may remain single throughout their lifetime, and not every woman will experience widowhood.

But we must understand the reality of our changing seasons if we want to “look carefully how we walk” and “make the best use of our time,” for the best deals vary from season to season. Last year’s great bargain might be this year’s foolish purchase.

And while we must walk with open eyes and make wise choices in each season, our comfort is this—God orders the seasons of our lives. Even the most difficult ones.

What God Chooses

When young, blond, sweet-as-they-come Cindy caught Bill’s eye, she thought it was the beginning of happily ever after. Cindy reveled in her role as wife and homemaker. She enjoyed cooking and decorating. She loved hanging out, playing games, and laughing with her husband. And she looked forward to what she assumed would be the next season of her life: motherhood.

But the season of motherhood never came for Cindy. It was many years before she realized that it probably never would. Soon after they were married, Bill began suffering severe and debilitating fatigue, weakness, and headaches. After a while he could no longer work. Cindy—this woman who wanted nothing more than to be at home—became the sole breadwinner.

Years of doctors, experimental treatments, and special diets availed nothing. Bill only got worse—so sick that he often was unable to leave the house. Finally, Bill and Cindy were forced to move from the church and friends they loved so that they could live in a location that offered a better quality of life for Bill. Gradually, Cindy realized that they would never have a family. This was not the life she had planned. It wasn't what she wanted. She felt stuck in a season that wouldn't end.

Like Cindy, none of us would choose “a time to weep,” or “a time to mourn,” or a time of sickness—a *lifetime* of sickness. This isn't what Cindy chose. But it's what God chose for Cindy. Here, inside this truth, Cindy found joy.

No, Bill didn't get better. She didn't become a mother. She still lived far away from dear friends. Yet she came to realize that this life—one she hadn't planned for herself—was the very life God had planned for her. God had designed this long, unexpected, unwelcome season so that Cindy could best glorify him. He had allowed this trial so that he could show his goodness and mercy to Cindy in totally unexpected ways. Cindy found joy when she came to rest in the truth that God orders our seasons.

If you were to meet Cindy, her joy would be immediately obvious. It's a deep joy, infused with peace. And it displays itself in a genuine care for others and continual expressions of gratefulness to God. To be around Cindy is to catch a glimpse of the love and goodness of Christ. Cindy isn't just surviving. She's truly thriving, growing, and rejoicing in the season God has ordained.

Scripture provides ample evidence that God sets the boundaries for each season. God determines when one closes and a new one begins. He is in complete charge and sovereignly rules

over every season of our lives. And his purpose for our lives in each season ultimately cannot be frustrated.

Proverbs 16:9 declares, “The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.” Nebuchadnezzar said about God, “All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’” (Dan. 4:35). The prophet Jeremiah professed, “I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps” (Jer. 10:23).

All too often, we arrogantly think we are in charge. We imagine that we’re planning and deciding our life’s course. Who are we kidding? We need to humble ourselves and acknowledge, “God, you are in charge. And I humbly accept your plan for the changing seasons of my life.”

We can trust this God who is in charge because we know his purposes are always directed for his glory and our good (Rom. 8:28). As author Elisabeth Elliot insists, “Everything that happens to you has come through the hedge of His love.”¹

What comfort and rest this brings to our hearts! As we seek to make the best use of time in every season, we can be confident that God’s divine wisdom and perfect love direct his purposes in our lives.

Because the Days Are Evil

So why is it so important to become wise shoppers of time in every season? Ephesians 5:16 gives the answer: “Because the days are evil.” We know this truth all too well. We only have to pick up a newspaper or turn on cable news to hear about the evil swirling around us. Every day we relate to a world

full of sinners, each with their own unique temptations. Not to mention the reality of Satan's attacks. But in truth we need look no further than our very own hearts wherein sin still wages war. We live in a fallen world.

In fact, Matthew 6 reminds us that *each day* brings its own set of troubles. We are continually exposed to evil. Therefore, it is imperative that we choose only the best opportunities each season has to offer, because we never know what trouble is waiting for us today—or tomorrow.

We're not trying to depress you or, worse yet, awaken fear. For while evil is a reality we must not ignore, it is not more powerful than our Savior. Jesus himself confirmed, "In the world you will have tribulation." However, he went on to say, "But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Through our Savior's death and resurrection, sin's rule in our hearts has been conquered, and Satan has been crushed under Christ's heel. Nothing in this world is out of his sovereign control. What's more, God uses even the evil in our lives for his glory and our good. So the reality of evil is not to produce fear but rather to inspire carefulness. It is to provoke us to live wisely—to encourage us to buy up the best deals in each and every season.

Five Tips

Because the days are evil, we must become prudent, circumspect shoppers of time. We can't afford to browse through life "just looking." This is serious business with eternal repercussions. That's why in the following chapters, we want to offer five tips for becoming wise shoppers of time:

- 1) Rise early.
- 2) Sit still.

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- 3) Sit and plan.
- 4) Consider people.
- 5) Plan to depend.

These tips are not our attempt at Christian-coated time management principles. Rather, they are biblical, life-tested practices we trust will encourage and assist you to bring glory to the Savior through every season of your life. So will you come shopping for time with us? We hope you'll find some deals that are simply too good to pass up.